TRACING A LINE

Portraits of Unley Women

by Tess Brady

an oral history initiative undertaken
by the City of Unley

PREFACE

"Tracing a Line" encouraged older women to share their memories of the Unley of the past. As the project progressed the unique relevance of their experiences and insights through the World War I, the Depression and World War II became clear. A team of people assisted in this process: Tess Brady (Writer), Rachel Teesdale-Smith (Community Arts Officer), Amanda McKay (Aged Care Worker) and Janet Maughan (Museum Curator).

It is hoped that this pilot project carried out by one group in the community will stimulate interest in the potential of oral history to express people's lives and experiences, leading to future Community Arts programmes incorporating oral history projects tapping the depths of living history which is clearly evident in Unley.

A.G. Usher.

A.G. USHER
TOWN CLERK
CITY OF UNLEY

6th April, 1984

INTRODUCTION

The following stories do not belong to any one woman, they are combinations of characters and they are thus not histories in the traditional sense. Much of what is included in this work is fictional. Sadly the more disturbing aspects of the lives of these fictional women are accounts of stories told to me in the progress of my investigations.

I have unfortunately had to leave out a great deal of material, many people have come forward and offered all sorts of memories and artifacts. Although they may not be recorded as such in this work, needless to say, they have been of enormous help in making real to me, the life and times of the early part of this century. They have all been recorded in the Unley Archives for use in other projects.

Tess Brady

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AGNES

There is nothing particulary mysterious about ageing, mine, yours, or anyones. A ride on a bus, a sit in the park, a walk down the street and we are confronted with it. Somehow it's too close, too ordinary to dwell on, to think about.

Dying seems to be separate. As children we are introduced to it in different ways, fortunately for me it was through the passing of pets, and a grandparent somewhere that I really didn't know. Seeing my father with tears telling about his mother. Leaving suddenly a beach house that no-one liked, mice on the floor and something about it seemed unfriendly, the policeman, just another part of it, mother's day and she lost her father.

Too young then really, for it to be any more than the falling of leaves.

My grandmother died a few years ago, she saw my child turn twelve. I must have watched the gradual losing of memory, the repetition of the same story again and again, the uncertainty on her feet, the nips of brandy. Looking back I didn't really have much time for her, they were all just stories and I didn't listen. She was born at the turn of the century, grew up in the twenties, lived through two world wars, a depression and brought up a host of kids. There were stories, just tissue paper memories now, of the gold fields at Kalgoolie, the rejection of the English snobbery of her colonial parents, the almond trees at Montacute, a town in the hills I have often wanted to find but never have. And the first time she sat behind the wheel of a car and had to drive around and around the dirt road block until it had run out of petrol. No-one had told her how to stop.

Somehow because it was my grandmother I didn't listen, I never thought of myself as ever being like her, as ever being so old.

Thus armed with my share of preconceived notions and a too bulky tape recorder that needed electrical power, I walked into a house with rose bushes out the front, and a white painted wire and post fence, the sword ferns, the cement path, the security wire door, too dark to see behind it, the frail lady inside, who later gave me rhubarb and stories.

The lounge room was dark, we sat in the old chairs that became familiar. There was the sideboard, the prints, framed in heavy wooden simple frames, the standard lamp, the mantle piece with the photographs of husband and children, the single power point with double adaptors, the curtains and venetian blinds, the objects of living, so much dusting to do, the kinds of trophies we all collect and dust and rearrange, shells from the sea, a candle stick, a vase, an ornament. The natural mistrust of me and the cassette recorder, churning away, recording faintly, stories of someone else's grandmother.

She'd been an organiser all her life this frail woman who saw through me in a single look, like the elders from a tribe carrying the secrets of simply living. I must have been amusing to her, she would have preferred to go for a ride in the car, call into a pub she hadn't visited before, sip on a drink, enjoy the sun and other people. We sat in the dark room and I wondered if she used it for anything else but visitors. There were parts of her life, like everyone I interviewed, that I promised not to mention, and I thought of my own family and the secret things that are lost in silence. There had been a sale the week before where all the bric a brac was sold up, disposed of. My mother looked lost without it, without these links in the chain to her past, the trophies had all gone.

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Agnes told me about the war, about her twenty years in the local branch of the Red Cross. She joined it six weeks after World War Two started. Just married and a honeymoon was out of the question. A new suburb and the

Red Cross must have been a way of meeting new people, as well as contributing to the war effort.

She listed off the things they did to raise money, they all mystified me. There were trots at Wayville Showgrounds every Saturday night, the Red Cross ladies, with their felt hats and badges, standing at the gate collecting. And people gave, the Goodwood branch usually brought in more money than elsewhere, simply on the basis of the trots.

And then there was the Mile of Pennies. It happened on shopping days on Goodwood Road, a penny was placed on the footpath, shoppers added their pennies until gradually the goal of a mile was reached. The pennies were scopped up, banked and another mile begun. That mile of pennies must have caused enormous temptation for the kids at Goodie Primary, a hot day and their tongues hanging out for an ice block.

The Red Cross Babies, a kind of fundraiser. Agnes entered her son in one and they raised almost a hundred pounds. They raised it by the mile of pennies, by card evenings, by fetes selling cakes for a penny each. They raised almost 24,000 pennies literally penny by penny, cake by cake, mile by mile. And yet Agnes knew from the very beginning that her son would never win, she was told that another child in the competition, a child from a monied family started off with a cheque for a hundred pounds.

RED CROSS JUNIOR COMPETITION 1942

AUSTRALIAN RED CROSS SOCIETY

UNLEY EXECUTIVE

All that effort and none of it was about winning. What mattered to Agnes and her helpers and all the women like her, was that they did their bit, no matter how small. They weren't about being winners, being presidents, being in the lime light, they were about getting on with the job.

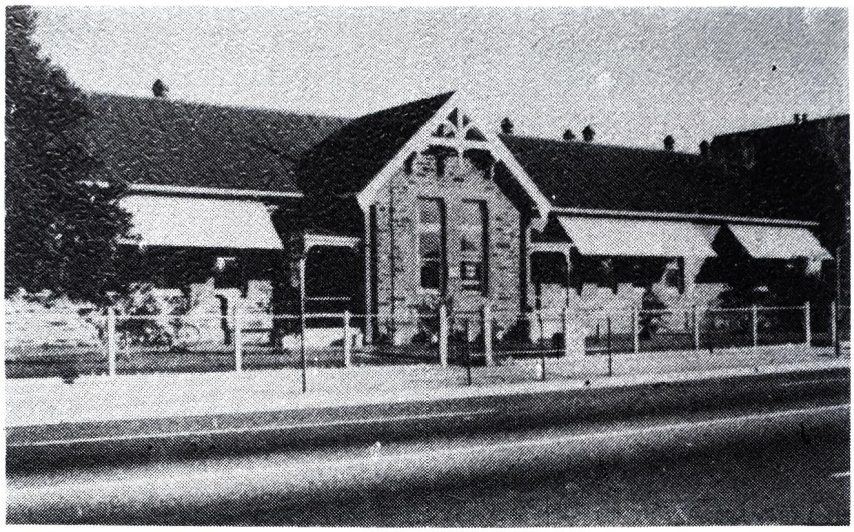
I became interested and went to Red Cross House. I wanted to find out more about the Goodwood branch, about the Mile of Pennies and the knitting bees, I wanted to find out more about Agnes, to hunt for photos or records, anything to make the experiences come to life outside of her lounge room and the row of roses in the front garden.

But there was nothing there I was kept waiting and then eventually, the accents were not hers, about the coming garden party in Government House, no the archives don't exsist, there might be a photo in the filing cabinate, nothing too busy, and the corridors had ornately framed pictures of patrons and ladies. I left dissapointed, decided to use the telephone, a much more demanding device when you want information, decided to trace the branch itself. But nothing. It no longer exsisted. And yes there were archives, in another building, no-one was allowed access, they'd do what they could, then the polite goodbyes and I was disillusioned. Disappointed at how so many women could be ignored, women like Agnes who had worked so hard, not as secretaries, as presidents, as patrons, but there on Goodwood Road, on Prospect Road, on Henley Beach Road, all over Adelaide, bending down in the streets collecting pennies from the pavement. They weren't recorded, then or now. The twenty year service payoff and the Red Cross goes on knocking on doors asking for money, garden parties at Government House, why weren't they all invited, made to feel welcome. Why didn't someone really understand that they were the backbone of it all.

But this was my anger not hers. There simply was a job to do and she did it like so many other women, who don't expect to be recorded or thanked through history.

We talked of Goodwood Primary School, her involvement when her son went there. The way there was a mothers' club for only the mothers of the infants and they had the task of raising funds for the whole school. She pestered the headmaster, Mr. Rees, to form a parents' club for the mothers of the older children and somehow found herself in both.

The Goodwood Primary School Centenary Booklet talks about the forming of the welfare club on the 18th July 1950, secretaries, presidents and treasurers were listed and fifteen unnamed mothers. On the 28th July 1950 there was "a penny drive on Goodwood Road," surely a Mile of Pennies, where ten pounds and nine shillings was raised.



There was something about the matter of factness of raising money so quickly, something about that Mile of Pennies on Goodwood Road that came over as Agnes' trade mark. Not mentioned in dispatches but out there doing the work. Her and the other fourteen unnamed mums.

She told me of a school fete where she had offered to make ten dozen small cakes to sell for one penny each to the kids and two pennies to anyone else. A couple of the other mums came to help her with the icing and decorating. They set up a production line, Agnes made the mixture, Gladys put out the patty pans on greased trays, spooned the mixture in, Joyce slid the trays into the oven, at the top, middle, cooling. Recycling the trays, more patty pans, making sure they didn't stick together, mixture, spooned in, placed in the oven. And over the other side of the kitchen, the jubes and hundreds and thousands and silver balls, all in bowls, the icing, pink, white, yellow, chocolate, the warmed blade of the knife dipping into the coloured icing. And all the time the chatter, the cups of tea.

One of the teachers kept coming in a car and taking the cakes away to the stall at the school yard where the rest of the fete was going on the chocolate wheel, the parade of decorated bikes, crepe paper woven through the wheels, the child cowboys and faries, sticky hands and tongues pink with lollies, barbeque sausages wrapped up in bread and the dads around the keg.

Back in the kitchen, exhausted, they did a count, sixty dozen cakes, made, cooked, iced, sold. At a penny each they raised three pounds.

The new stove didn't give her the same control over her baking and I knew what she meant, baking was an art. It's a bit like being able to wash whites so that they come out white, like the ads for soap powder, that and baking and a few other things, all lost arts to me. Her forte was cooking and money raising, at the knitting bees she was only allowed to knit the straight part of the sock, the difficult parts, the heel and toes were done by someone else. Even the bad knitters had a part in the sock brigade.

We went for a walk outside, she picked the rhubarb and showed me how the passionfruit was struggling trying to seek out some nutrient, but the soil was being robbed by the over planted garden next door. I asked her if she would ever move, into a home or a unit, if she felt the house was too big for her now, but she'd rather be dead, "no air around you in those places". And the very few who were still left in the street, the story of the friend who came to her door one Sunday morning, upset. The friend had been going to the same church hall all her life, she used to live in the street, the house with the red brick fence and the fish pond in the front garden, but now she lives in a unit at the beach and travels every Sunday by taxi to the church. The community told her she should go to a church closer to where she lives, she should stop making the taxi journey, there was a nice church down the road from her unit. It was probably said in good faith, someone was probably trying to be helpful. But Agnes' friend was upset. "It's just like the passionfruit vine out there", she said "They don't want us any more". We were standing at the front door, "It's all new people in the street now, few of us left".

"They don't want us anymore," resounded in so many conversations and I kept hearing, "the church was too busy that day to bury my husband so I had him buried somewhere else," and "the parson had a luncheon appointment on the day of my husband's funeral, so he sent someone else, from another parish. You'd have thought he was burying a dog".

What it all came down to was an understandable fear of change that erodes their way of coping in our unfamiliar world of video machines, punk hair styles and an alien morality. Some retreat into their own world of senior citizens' clubs and organisations and squabble over politics as we all squabble over the politics of the clubs

and organisations we are in. Gossip is a marvelous way of coping with changes we feel uncomfortable about.

But Agnes still lived in the street, in the house she moved to on the day of her wedding, there was something a lot tougher about her. She wasn't afraid of going straight to the top when she wanted something done, the mayor, the local member, the principal of the school. I was amazed at her lack of fear of authority figures and decided to trace her steps, to find out just what was involved in going to see someone like the local member.

I called in, an appointment was made. I went away. then a phone call and another day delayed the interview. Eventually I sat in the small office and waited. He was busy, I couldn't hear what was going on, someone was with him, something about the police, and phone calls. I sat watching the secretary typing out a recorded letter and chattered from time to time about typewriters and dictaphone systems. There was a small pottery monster animal, the same shape and colour as one my child made at school and gave me for Christmas. There were some posters encouraging us to credit disabled people with ability, "Braille - Blind - Inventor,""Beethoven - Deaf - Composer," and "Napoleon - Epileptic - Dictator." The last amused me, I didn't think it gave the epileptic's good press, being a dictator is not exactly a label that carries prestige. Eventually my appointment and he was sympathetic, he did act for people. We talked for a long time and he told me of a story he heard while helping in the recent Unley floods. Some of the older men remembered much greater floods than we experience now. On one occasion, when they were boys and lived at the back of the Hyde Park pub, they waded around the back of the pub, nobody noticed them, all the adults were too busy with the flood. They unbolted the cellar doors, the water rushed in and out came bobbing up and down, the wooden barrels of beer, floating down King William Road never to be seen again. Even the barrels made terrific fire wood.

I discovered Agnes didn't have to go through the wait I had endured. I was wrong again, a phone call to his home was an instant hot line through to action.

I became more and more aware of how little I understood or knew

these women. But then how could I know them, I haven't lived through two world wars and a depression, and they are not just words, or romantic images in movies, or horror stories in realistic documentaries. I haven't collected money at the trots or on Goodwood Road, or baked endless cakes to sell for a penny, I can't get my washing white, I can't even cast on, let alone knit the straight parts of a sock. Indeed it was a sock pattern that was my first knitting exercise. I was in grade III and we had to knit bed socks, nothing complicated about that, but what I produced bore no relationship to a sock at all. Perhaps that is why I have a great respect for these women who can knit the socks, organise the war effort, structure the school society. And I've learnt a lot about these women, I've moved some distance from that first day I walked in the white wire gate, past the rose bushes, the sword ferns, past the atitude of the patronising Red Cross lady who told Agnes when she recently went to rejoin that organisation, "Don't worry love, in a short time you will settle in, learn our ways", Agnes laughed and said "I can teach you a thing or two girlie".

BETTY

It was a hot day and I'd been in the car for most of it. The street directory led me to a neat little house with gravel and pot plants out the front and a small wrought iron fence. As soon as I got out of the car Betty and her husband were waiting for me at the door.

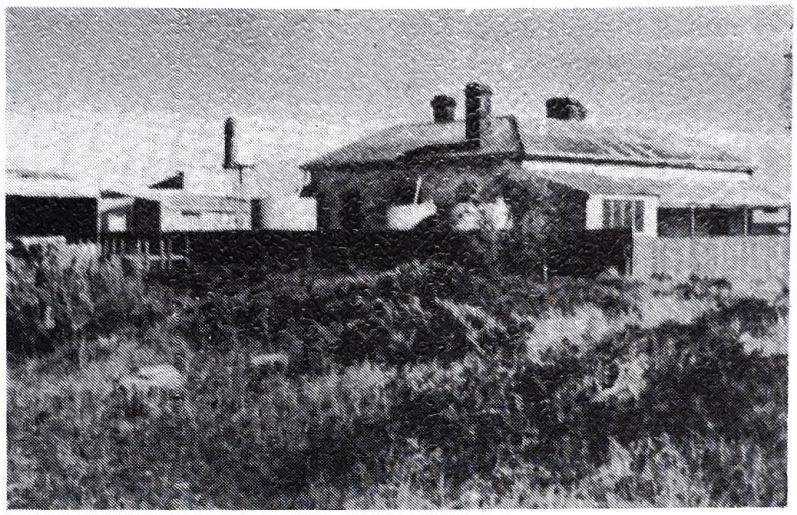
The front room was bright, a leather lounge suite that she bought when they were married and still lasting well, a fire place surround made of concrete but looking like carved wood, the standard lamp, a small table with papers and records of the Senior Citizen Club when they ran the music side of things, all ready for me, along with the cool drink and the lavish afternoon tea. Cheese, biscuits, curried egg sandwiches. We chatted away with an excitment and the old fan burred in the background. Saint Patrick's Day tomorrow and its time to plant sweet peas. Amazing I thought, I can remember that, I'd bought a packet of sweet pea seeds in the hope that this year I would remember to plant them in time. The trouble with sweet peas are that they take a good six months before they flower and I'm the kind of gardener that remembers to plant when I see the flowers in the market. Another piece of folk knowledge that makes remembering so much easier.

She almost ran around the kitchen, unable to take things slowly, Lifting a heavy large kettle of boiling water, warming the pot, then the tea leaves, and the kettle on the stove coming to the boil again.

We sat down and began the party, I had to write my questions down as she couldn't hear me and kept on changing her glasses, the red frames for reading, the blue ones for seeing. I asked about the sideboard in the dining room, she'd won it in a raffle, a lucky ticket at the silent movies. They were every Saturday night at the Unley Town Hall, everyone went, kids, mums and dads. Someone played the piano from behind the curtain. She liked the comedies, Charlie Chaplin, with his hat and walking stick. At the time she was sixteen and a "terrible flirt," she knew all the boys. She went up to be presented with her prize and fell off the stage. She just didn't see the steps. The whole audience laughed and absolutely everybody knew who she was From then on, no matter where she walked in Unley, people called out, "Here comes Miss Sideboard".

That was how she met Jack, he was one of the boys who thought it all so funny. They have been married now for fifty three years, but

it was probably in the first two weeks that the formula for success was worked out. Jack had to go to a metting and asked Betty to clean his shoes. "I promised to love and obey you but I never promised to clean your shoes", she did it that once, but since then all shoe cleaning has been Jack's department.



They moved to the country where they had a general store. The store belonged to Jack's father, Betty had never lived in the country before. They had a neat but old house and the bath had seen better days. The first time she ran a bath, water gushed out from a rust hole that grew larger as she watched in amazement. Betty wasn't going to start off married life with a bath soldered back together. Without talking to Jack she contacted the travelling rep and ordered a bath on time payment. It arrived the next day, white and clean and beautifully enameled. It stood on four cast iron claw legs and cost twelve pounds and ten shillings.

Paying for it was her responsibility so she gave music lessons and joined a local group of musicians. Once a week the four of them, piano, sax, drums and violin, went off in Bill's old car down country roads that seemed to go on forever to square dances in barns and weddings in R.S.L. halls and parties at the big houses. She'd come home late and tired, more often than not Jack couldn't wait up any longer, but always she would find a tray of sandwiches and a thermos of coffee. In six months she had paid for the bath.

They worked together in the general store, which was much the same as any in the country. The wooden verandah, a couple of wooden barrels awaiting pick up, and the bench, a cool place to sit out of the sun. And inside, the undercovered wooden floor, the long counters with glass jars of licorice all sorts, conversation lollies, jubes, boiled sweets, the box of fresh marshmallows made by old Mrs. Turner, all covered in white icing sugar. The hessian bags of sugar and flour, and over the other side, rubber boots in all sizes, men's large brim hats and rolls and rolls of different coloured fabrics.

Jack wore bands on his sleeves and a leather apron. Betty weighed out the sugar into rations, castor sugar, brown sugar, icing sugar, white sugar, it took her a day to make up the little brown paper rations On the first Tuesday of every month she'd weigh them all out. There was a girl who came in on those days and helped. It was a big job, and you had to be ever so careful, the weight had to match the coupon.

Tired, on one of those Tuesday nights, Betty discovered her wedding ring was missing. They both went into the back room of the store and searched everywhere. On the floor, by the scales, into the shop itself. She emptied out the jar of conversation lollies, she remembered that during the day she tried to find an 'I love you' and a 'kiss me' for Penny who probably wanted to tease her teacher, a very young man fresh out of teacher's college. It wasn't there. Betty didn't know what to do, she had looked everywhere. She didn't want another one and Jack kept suggesting it. He was only trying to be helpful but it didn't help at all. She spent the rest of the evening playing her piano, trying to forget about it. But her heart wasn't in her playing.
The next morning a farmer's wife came into the store holding Betty's wedding ring. Apparently it had fallen off in the white sugar and as the lady poured the sugar into her container she heard a clunk. It was Betty's ring falling against the metal canister.

One New Year's Eve Jack and Betty were up at the lookout, Monument Hill, she said "Let's go down to the Methodist Church and ring the bell, let's tell everyone it's New Year's". Off they went. They found the chain of the bell, but the boys from the town had been there before them. Alf's house cow had it's tail tied to the chain so that whenever the cow moved the bell rang which in turn made the cow moo loudly. Jack and Betty disturbed the cow who had finally managed to fall

asleep. The ringing and mooing started all over again, with lights going on all down the street.

Betty's stories came with the speed of her feet, the changing of glasses from red to blue frames and back again, the pouring of tea and handing around sandwiches. She was like a fairy playing the fiddle, delighting everyone.

There were nights around the piano, Jack and their friends from the town and the nearby farms. In the country you had to make your own fun. Betty would make a wonderful supper, savory cheese boats, a delicious morney, sliced ham, lettuce and chicken legs, curried egg sandwiches and sponge cake with cream and fresh strawberries. Betty played the piano and they all sang. "My Grandfather's Clock", "Galway Bay", "When Irish Eyes are Smiling", so many songs from Gilbert and Sullivan, "The Wandering Minstrel", "Tit Willow", "Bother the Flowers that Bloom in the Spring", and "Daisy" and "Two Little Girls in Blue". At Christmas she would play the favorite carols, they took parts for "The Twelve Days Of Christmas", and Jacks always did a solo of "Silent Night". The songs changed as the years went on, "Pack up your Troubles in your Old Kit Bag" and "Lillie Marlene", and as life became harder with the depression growing more intense, the drought that wouldn't break, each year they'd sing and mean every word of "Auld Lang Syne".

They'd seen too many swaggies go past. Young men, good men. Sometimes they stopped at the store and Betty gave them a Woodies lemonade bottle full of tea and some sandwiches. It became a regular sight, the swaggies on the front verandah bench. Those poor men walked miles to find work on the railway. They'd walk all the way from Adelaide to find work, but there was none. One morning some of the town's folk found a swag in the park. The river was up and they couldn'tfind the swaggy anywhere. Eventually they opened the swag and in it they found a Bible.

And the gypsies with their bright colours and ribbons and their tricks, if Jack knew they were coming he'd shut the shop, too many things were stolen. They hadn't been in the country long, it was near Christmas and the store had a lot of toiletries, Fauldings perfumes and the like, suddenly the gypsies were everywhere. Two of them

went to Jack and demanded the money from the till, an older woman came to Betty and wanted whatever she had on her. She said she didn't have anything, but the gypsy said "You lie". Betty felt in her apron and there was sixpence, the change from the meat. The woman took it and Betty's handkerchief. She put the coin in the hanky and made a knot, then gave the hanky back to Betty and laughed. They took a lot of things, the women the perfume, the men, hats and boots, and eventually left. Betty undid the knot in her hanky but the coin wasn't there.

I listened to all her stories, but the only pictures I have of gypsies and swaggies come to me from childhood books, the ribbons and colours and noise, the slow plod of the man with the dull clothes big brimmed hat and a swag, maybe a dog. The gypsies and the swaggies, romantic images from our past, but to Betty they were real, and each carried their own kind of sadness. Try as I may, they still seemed like the bright colours in a bunch of sweet pea blossoms. Perhaps it was because her stories were so full of life, her telling of them without malice.

Betty was taking me back too far, to something in my folk lore, something as strange and yet familiar as "Waltzing Matilda".

I had to remember to plant the sweet peas.

EDITH

Edith took some time to find in the nursing home. At the best of times I'm not a good hospital visitor and although I tried to tell myself that all was well, and in spite of the newly aquired pocket size cassette recorder, when I found her at the hairdresser's my anxiety must have shown.

I wheeled her to her own room, small and very bright, a fancy pink bedspread, a plastic lea from her grandson's trip to America, a bright a bright red fluffy doll and a white swan ornament. The window looked onto a courtyard and noise came from the television room just down the hall.

I asked her if she enjoyed being at the home,"Yes dear, very much. It's wonderful here, a beautiful place". And then to set me totally at ease, she listed off the large number of activities and outings that take place almost daily.

But it was a long way away from Agnes' dark lounge room, from the houses Edith once lived in, two of them in the same street, spanning fifty-eight years. The room was too small for many links with the past, the white swan ornament was the only thing she'd taken with her.

We talked of the old days, the horse and cart delivery days and of Mr. Witmarsh delivering the ice on Mondays and the wood on Wednesdays. He knew all the mums, and their children played together, made billy carts and mimicked dad. For eighteen pence you could buy a pair of rabbits off the cart and vegies and meat. The shopping in the streets and the cup of tea, the chat about the children. Having to move house to one with cheaper rent as the depression made life more and more difficult. And the men, pick and shovel on the roads, working for their rations.

And the good times, the Unley Council Workers' Picnic in the hills, the sack races and the egg and spoons, the picnic hampers, the easy summer day, the boys tadpolling in the creek, the train ride home.

Her husband was a warden in the Second World War, she never went to the bomb shelter at the Town Hall, but they dug one in their backyard. And she was a knitter in the same Red Cross branch as Agnes. The needles were cane, number thirteens and the wool, khaki,

felt like rope, they'd sit around at the Goodwood Institute, she could knit a pair of socks in a week.

Cards were handed out with patterns of mittens, or cardigans or balaclavas or socks. Edith knitted socks "4 inches pearl and plain, 11 inches the leg, 10½ to 11 the foot. Put 72 stitches on and then do this", she showed me, "and then take 36 to make the heel, graft the toes with the turning of the stitches together", more demonstration as her hands flicked at imaginery wool and she tried to share with me something that I knew would always remain a personal mystery. "Easy", she said, "we all could knit in those days". I winced.

One day a letter from a lady in America. The knitters weren't supposed to, but they all put a note in the toe of the sock saying who knitted it and their address. Edith was lucky, later, Mitch, the boy soldier who wore the socks, came to Australia and made friends with Edith's daughter. Other women have told me that it was always the lucky ones who got the letters, who actually had contact with the people they knitted for. Sitting in the Goodwood Institute it must have been a high point of talk when Edith read out her letter, all the way from America.
We ended our knitting lesson as lunch had just started, I walked her down the corridors, more relaxed than when I came in.

On the way home I passed an antique shop that has a basket of bric a brac out the front. I stopped to go through it, once before I had found a leather satchel for fifty cents. This time I found a rather ordinary brown pottery bowl, it was the one my mother filled with nuts or olives or savory biscuits and put out on the laminex coffee table with the newspapers and National Geographic on the metal frame underneath I paid my fifty cents and put it carefully with the other bits and pieces I had found in the shops after the sale. I wasn't sure why I was collecting

these bits and pieces, something to do with the white swan ornament being the only thing kept from fifty years in a house. It was just an ornament, nothing valuable about it, just the kind of thing I'd find in a fifty cent tray.

That afternoon I recieved a phone call, my father had been rushed to hospital with a heart attack. I went straight in, he looked terrible, flushed, tired, and wired up to machines and video screens. My father who made up stories all his life, told me of Starlight the bushranger, the Governor's daughter and all the romances of being a child. His face no longer animated, he seemed older than all the women I had been talking to. The long corridors echoed with smells, the range of faces in the lifts, the dread that I'd wander into someone else's room, see something that I wasn't meant to see. My private fear of hospitals eased by Edith in the morning, exaggerated in the afternoon. Suddenly I felt part of the ageing process in a way I never had before.

Word got around to the ladies about my father and without noticing it I was taken into another circle, "How's your father dear?", "yes it's terrible isn't it, quite a shock". There was now something in my life that I could share with them. They had been through it all so many times and I was a novice, learning to take on a new kind of adult responsibility. The kind of responsibility where the child-parent roles shift, where the child takes on nurturing, the caring, the attending to details. It no longer was this girl from the outside stealing snap shots of their memories. I looked back to when I began the project, to a time that seemed miles away, and smiled at the way I thought I had to put them at ease.
I thought of Rose, sitting in the bay window of a large sitting room, white tulle curtains behind her, and behind them the neat paths, trees and lawn.

She'd been governess as a girl, wandered about the country, set up her own school, employed other teachers.

We talked of all that but her hands kept moving and she played,twisting, and turning, with her wedding ring, as she told me of last summer. The man who put a knife to her throat. She was sitting in the car with her husband, watching the sea, young lovers, then suddenly. Her hand kept pulling at her wedding ring.

I began to understand why the stories from the past weren't important to the women. Why my questions of how much did the ice cost, and where were you born, and tell me about the depression, seemed like too many questions of a pestering young child.

For all the ladies I talked to, going to the hairdresser on Wednesday is more important than stories from the past, because going to the hairdresser on Wednesday is about being alive, about making decisions, maintaining control over your own life. It's about being able to live and look after your own house, it's about Mary and the way she told me of a trip to the Barossa by moving her finger over an army survey map. She told me of the animals and the creeks and the trees, and her fingers turned what was to me an empty map into a moving landscape.

It's not so much that we need to deny history, that would be foolish, but rather we need to stop collecting stories of the old as if they are post cards, or stamps to place in an album, carefully labelled and catalogued. The stories are like the lines on the army survey map, the barest threads of information lost in facts and figures, numbers and names. Mary's finger traces out not simply the places on the map, but the bus, the other people on the journey, the things they spoke about and what they had for lunch. It traces out what happened to her before she got on the bus, and after, when she came home. It traces out her understanding of people, gained from eighty years of living.

I didn't know either of my grandmothers, they weren't there to teach me how to knit, to bake a sponge, a custard pie. I didn't listen when they tried to tell me, when they tried to show me, I thought they were too old to know anything about my world, too out of date.

It's amazing how wrong you can be.